

ABORIGINAL PROTOCOLS: COMMUNICATION

This is a general guide on tips for communicating with Aboriginal people, but you should always try and consult with Aboriginal people if unsure about how to communicate.

If you are unable to source a local Aboriginal person, try contacting an officer employed in an Aboriginal Identified role – they are there to help. For example, this could be the Landcare NSW Community Landcare Aboriginal Engagement Officer or your Local Land Services Aboriginal Officer.

WHY DO WE HAVE 'ABORIGINAL IDENTIFIED' POSITIONS?

Think of them as being like a door-to-door salesperson – to 'open the door' of engagement that has been closed for years due to historic factors, an Aboriginal officer can sometimes achieve faster and more effective results as the time required to build rapport and trust can be accelerated – as the saying goes "time is money".

This is not to say that non-Aboriginal people cannot achieve the same results in the same timeframe and there are countless examples of non-Aboriginal people doing just this.

COMMUNICATION

- Don't mimic Aboriginal speech patterns or attempt to speak Aboriginal English as a way of encouraging an Aboriginal person to be more open.
- Be careful of the language you use – written, verbal and non-verbal – when communicating with Aboriginal people.
- Respect silence and don't mistake it for misunderstanding a topic or issue.
- Always wait your turn to speak.
- Be aware that words might have different meanings in different communities.
- Use clear, uncomplicated language. Don't use jargon.
- Be careful not to ask someone to continually repeat themselves if it is difficult to understand them, especially in front of a large group – and especially if they're an Elder.

This may cause what is known as 'shame'. The concept of shame is broader than the non-Aboriginal use of the word. The meaning of shame extends to include embarrassment in certain situations and is often due to attention or circumstances rather than as the result of an action by oneself. The feeling of shame can totally overwhelm and disempower an Aboriginal person.

- Try to speak clearly but do not shout.



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- Assist with reading and writing if it is required – and be sensitive to feelings.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms.
- Be aware that swear words may be a part of accepted conversation.
- Not all Aboriginal people will maintain eye contact when you are speaking to them. Do not be offended as this is often a sign of respect.

Aboriginal people more frequently listen without looking than do non-Aboriginal people and feel no strong obligation to look at the person talking to them. Some individuals who show few signs of attention when spoken to may nevertheless be listening.

- Listen, be receptive and allow Aboriginal people time to finish a thought or a sentence. Do not use slowness as an indication of intelligence.
- Do not try to fill the silence with unnecessary talk.
- To show disinterest or impatience is to show a lack of respect.
- Do not assume that an Aboriginal person who is not responding appropriately has failed to grasp your message – do not proceed to speak in a louder voice. This approach only adds confusion and unpleasantness to the situation.

A quieter voice accompanied by a more personalised, less aggressive approach achieves much better results as it activates normal co-operation tendencies.

- Be aware that deafness and ear infection is a chronic health problem for many Aboriginal people.

DISCLAIMER: The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of publication. However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information with the user's independent advisor.

